

A Revelation of Purgatory, edited and translated by Liz Herbert McAvoy. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017. Pp. xii + 187. ISBN: 1843844710 (hardcover).

Liz Herbert McAvoy's scholarship has long established her as an expert interpreter of medieval women's literary culture. In books and articles meticulously aware of the postmodern theoretical stakes and critical narratives through which we engage premodern literature, she has charted new paths of inquiry into texts and authors both canonical and little-known. Her new edition and translation of *A Revelation of Purgatory* continues this important work. *A Revelation* recounts the visions of an anonymous author, most likely an anchoress, received over three nights in the year 1422. It describes the purgatorial suffering of the visionary's deceased friend Margaret, who interprets her own suffering, requests the intercession of the visionary and other living friends, and is finally delivered from purgatory into paradise. Building on McAvoy's recent examinations of women's literary culture in England (particularly her collaboration with Diane Watt), and earlier work on *A Revelation* by Marta Powell Harley, Mary Erler, and herself, this new edition offers much to students and experts alike. It will be enormously useful for the classroom and will become the standard edition for future scholarship on the text.

If re-editing *A Revelation* appears a traditional feminist enterprise of textual recovery, the accompanying introduction and notes provide a theoretically forward-thinking, intersectional approach to the multiple literary, spiritual, and cultural discourses that inform this anonymous fifteenth-century visionary text. A generous introduction of almost seventy pages establishes many of the interpretive threads that continue throughout the explanatory notes, formally uniting the project's theoretical investments. Divided into ten sections, the introduction gives equal attention to *A Revelation's* author, recipients, sources, influences, doctrinal investments, and manuscripts, as well as to its role within the medieval literary canon. Of particular use for students will be the first two sections, "The Canon and Invisibility" and "Women's Writing: The Wider Context." These sections develop arguments advanced elsewhere by McAvoy about the wide circulation and influence of medieval women's texts, as well as the reasons that they have been overlooked. They show how recognizing and challenging that scholarly neglect "argues for a concerted pushing back of boundaries and limitations, a rethinking of what constitutes 'women's writing' and for a temporary deprioritizing of those few 'named' and/or 'identifiable' women [. . .] so that other anonymous and more shadowy women writers may emerge into the limelight" (10).

Scholars of religious literature will appreciate sections five, six, and seven: “The Doctrine of Purgatory in the Middle Ages,” “Medieval Women’s Responses to Purgatory,” and “Purgatory: The English Literary Tradition.” Together, these three sections argue for women’s substantial yet often unrecognized influence on the doctrine of purgatory as both subjects and authors—an intervention into the critical debate over the temporal origins of purgatory which itself takes on gendered stakes. Building on Barbara Newman’s work on the high medieval situation, McAvoy shows here how *A Revelation* represents the Middle English tradition of women’s purgatorial piety that long predates the Latinate patriarchal version of that history offered by Jacques Le Goff. Other notable facets of these sections include a reading of *A Revelation* within both the English literary tradition of purgatorial poetics as well as the broader continental tradition of women’s purgatorial piety. In the former discussion, McAvoy traces connections to Bede, the *Visio Tnugdali*, *The Gast of Gy*, *Sir Owain*, and even Marie de France’s *L’Espurgatoire de Seint Patriz*; the latter discussion proves more temporally and geographically far-reaching, placing *A Revelation* into dialogue with—among others—Hildegard of Bingen, the Liègeois *mulieres religiosae*, the Helfta women, Elisabeth of Schönau, and Mechtild of Hackeborn. In both literary contexts, McAvoy traces a feminist poetics of purgatorial intercession and bodily suffering that offers salvation for both self and community and a view of purgatory as “a place of hope and progress which eventually will be transcended” (53). McAvoy’s observations about *A Revelation*’s connections to ecclesiastic reform prove a particularly intriguing thread throughout these sections; and while I would have enjoyed further discussion of reform, it remains the job of new editions such as this one to raise new lines of inquiry for future scholars to pursue.

As she explains at the end of the introduction, McAvoy bases this edition of *A Revelation* on the version contained in the Thornton manuscript (Lincoln Cathedral Library MS 91), a logical choice given the text’s previous editorial history (Carl Horstmann’s 1895/96 edition of the Thornton manuscript’s *Revelation* included no editorial apparatus; Marta Powell Harley edited the version contained in Warminster, Longleat House MS 29 in 1985). McAvoy gives three compelling reasons for this decision. First, the Thornton MS version lacks a complete modern scholarly edition. Second, the manuscript and its readers currently enjoy enthusiastic scholarly attention (see, for example, Susannah Fein and Michael Johnston’s *Robert Thornton and his Books*), and, third, it now also exists in a widely accessible facsimile. McAvoy’s own editorial practice strives to include as much detail about marginalia (in both Latin and

Middle English), manuscript variants, scribal error, and ownership as possible. This scrupulous attention to material detail integrates richly with the notes' attention to *A Revelation's* engagement with numerous literary and religious traditions, including anchoritic and lay "virtual communities," visionary literature, and purgatorial piety (21).

Liz Herbert McAvoy has done a tremendous service in producing this volume. She reads *A Revelation* as a significant text within intersecting fifteenth-century discourses, and her editorial practice both reflects this approach and demonstrates its benefits. In arguing that *A Revelation's* "ethics of the feminine insistently present women's spirituality, and those writings that emerged from it, as fundamental to the (re)shaping of the religious landscapes in which they operated," she once again shows how renewed attention to questions of canonicity, gender, and genre can continue to expand our view of the medieval literary world (63). By making a text such as *A Revelation* newly accessible to a wider audience, moreover, she not only models nuanced feminist engagement with medieval literary culture, but also points toward new directions for the study of medieval women's texts and authorship.

Barbara Zimbalist
The University of Texas at El Paso